TIME OUT!

July 17, 1988

11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Ephesians 2:14-22
Mark 6:30-34

"'Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while.' For many were coming and going and they had no leisure even to eat."
--Mark 6:31 (RSV)

"Come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest..." Where is it for you? Where is the lonely place to which you can retreat when, in St. Mark's graphic image, so many are coming and going there is no leisure even to eat. A description, I always thought, tailor made for dinner time in a household with five children.

Where do you go to be alone, to be yourself, to get acquainted with yourself again? How do you manage it - the place and the time - which gives you an opportunity to reflect on your experience, think about your life, dream, plan, hope? When and how do you create "leisure," which Webster defines as "freedom provided by the cessation of activity; time free from work or duties"?

A hard working physician friend of mine rents a motel room once a month to get caught up on his reading and dictating and to have dinner alone. Some go to extraordinary lengths. Wisconsin, Michigan, Maine or North Carolina will do the job. Although sometimes it takes such a herculean effort to pack the car, drive half way across the continent, that the pay-back in terms of actual leisure is quite small. A sightseeing vacation is not what we are talking about. In fact, sightseeing adventures are exciting, interesting and wonderful but they are in no way leisurely. Part of the reason is that hard-working, goal-oriented people, can work pretty hard at their sightseeing as well, I have been told.

Some time ago there was a National Public Radio feature about a woman who had changed jobs in order to be closer to home and avoid the commute every morning. But after a few weeks she returned to driving her car - around the city for 30 minutes before reporting to her job, one block from her apartment. The reason, she told the reporter, was that she had very much missed the 30 minutes of solitary, quiet, aloneness in her car before and after work. No one who lives in a big city romanticizes rush hour on the expressway, but the woman had a point I have discovered since moving

next door to my work. I miss that quiet alone time. And I have seriously considered jumping in my car and driving around the North Side for half an hour before coming to the office.

Part of the allure of long distance running, biking, swimming is that it forces the issue of aloneness. And while there is a lot of physical activity going on, the mind and spirit are given a very lovely gift of time and space to be for a while.

The simple truth is that we need time alone in order to be whole, human and healthy. And another simple truth is that it is very difficult to find that time in the middle of the kind of life most of us lead. I am convinced that the pace is faster and continues quickening. I am convinced that we are living harder, working longer; it has something to do with the accumulation of complex urban systems clamoring for our attention as well as the illusion that high technology and data processing make it all more manageable. A hundred years ago people didn't try to do all the things we pack into a day, all the places we push ourselves to be. It is, I am convinced, a result of an unholy collusion between the Puritan Work Ethic, which celebrates hard work, and the New Narcissism, which celebrates selfishness - and makes the theologically questionable, but economically popular suggestion that buying things will make you happy, and in order to buy things you have to make money, and the way to make money is to work until you drop. It's not true, of course, even if you accept the first proposition, because if you work 'til you drop you won't be buying anything. "All work and no play" not only makes Jack a dull boy - in all probability it makes him tired, sick and eventually dead.

One of the most persistent themes in the Bible is that God sends people into the world to live faithfully, and then calls them to retreat from life, to be alone, quiet. Israel barely escapes from the armies of Pharaoh and then goes into the wilderness for forty years to learn how to be a nation. Jesus is baptized by John and before he launches his ministry spends 40 days alone - in a wilderness where he is not only vulnerable to the temptations of Satan, but accessible to angels who come to him as well. And so, the lesson this morning - one of the most grace-filled and poignantly human incidents in the New Testament.

Jesus has sent the disciples out, two by two, to the villages of Galilee, to teach and heal and preach; and now they have returned - exhilarated, exhausted, glad to see each other, full of stories. What he sits them down to tell them, apparently, is that his cousin, John the Baptist, his ally, is dead - has been executed, summarily beheaded at the whim of the Queen's daughter. It's not only a gruesome tale - it immediately takes the wind out of their sails by showing in very graphic terms, what the stakes of this business are, who has the real power and authority around Galilee, and what the probable outcome is for anyone who presumes to address the powers and authorities... I can literally feel the sudden, sickening, catch in the throat - the exhilaration turning to weary depression as they hear it. The tragedy sinks in and they sit down, one by one, and put their heads in their hands.

Meantime the crowds are pressing in, clamoring for him - and them. There are old people, sick people, blind, crippled, children...

And it is at this moment that Jesus says, "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest a while." They had to be alone. They had to reflect on what had just happened. It was not a luxury - this leisure. It was an absolute necessity if they were to retain sanity, strength and courage to go on... This isn't a sightseeing trip. This is Jesus saving the lives of his weary, tired and very frightened friends.

It was a simple, direct command - "Come away by yourselves." And my proposal to you this morning is that many of us would be hard pressed to obey it.

Dr. Wayne Oates is a very distinguished Professor of the Psychology of Religion at the Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville - a friend and former colleague of Dr. John Boyle, who taught there as well. Wayne Oates maintains that there is a disease among us called "Workaholism." Before "Type-A Behavior" and "Co-Dependency" became household words, Oates was writing books about work addiction. In one of them, The Confessions of a Workaholic, Professor Oates proposes that "workaholism is addiction to work, uncontrollable need to work incessantly. It has its beginnings in childhood. It becomes acute in the second and third decades of life. If it is not reversed or arrested in the forties or early fifties, it becomes chronic and may lead to death in one form or another in the late fifties and/or early sixties." [p. 1]

What are the symptoms of workaholism?

1. A workaholic will find a way in nearly every social conversation to tell how early he comes to work, how late he stays and how little sleep he gets.

2. A workaholic is always busy, even at leisure she is tightly programmed, preoccupied and running slightly behind. She will also, in private, compare the amount of work she produces with the paltry efforts of her peers.

3. A workaholic believes if he doesn't do it, nobody will. He takes on more and more; commits to so many people that nothing gets done well - and the result is "an anxiety depression amounting to panic." [p. 60]

4. A workaholic has real trouble with leisure, takes little time off, says with considerable pride, "I haven't had a real vacation for three years." A workaholic takes a briefcase to the beach, feels real guilt if there is a minute of time unstructured, empty, open...

5. A workaholic is "other directed" rather than "inner directed" and simply doesn't have time for an inner life.

6. A workaholic has trouble with grace - all the way from the inability to receive gifts from others, to the inability to hear the idea of God's inclusive, unmerited, gracious love. Workaholics believe they can produce whatever they need... by working for it... earning it - "the old fashioned way." And so when the news of a Divine Love not based on merit, hours on the job, sweat and hard work, but on the inherent, mysterious grace of a loving God is proclaimed - they simply don't hear it.

These are the signs. Some of them are evident in all of us, I believe, and all of them are evident in some of us. And I readily confess my own complicity - with no sense of pride, but a deep sense of gratitude for those friends and loved ones with a strong enough sense of grace to assure me that I do not hold up the world on my shoulders - God does. The work that needs doing will get done, and if it doesn't human progress will not grind to a halt. If I were not surrounded by grace-filled people I wouldn't dare preach this sermon. But I am and I will continue - because the topic is critical and the disease is deadly.

The difficult thing about workaholism is that the culture supports, encourages and applauds it. American business, guided by bottom-line thinking, too frequently regards excessive work, not as a deadly problem but as evidence of loyalty and commitment and, therefore, worth. William Whyte who wrote the classic work, The Organization Man, discovered that large companies depend on those selfless ascetics who will subordinate all for the company. Large organizations, including churches, love workaholics.

Sales training programs advise young employees to eat, sleep and play - company first, to read business literature instead of novels, listen to motivational tapes while driving to work, and plan weekends around sales opportunities.

What is not funny is the price everyone knows we are paying for workaholism in burn-out, divorce, depression, addiction, heart disease, death, and, of course, the guilt - the guilt we feel when we don't work hard enough and the guilt we feel when we do.

What's the answer? The logical answer is to react, revolt, sell out, cash in, take up pottery in the mountains of West Virginia. But everyone can't do that. There aren't enough road side spots in West Virginia to accommodate even a portion of the workaholics in Chicago. Besides, this whole exercise borders on over-simplification. Hard work is not the problem. Addiction to work is. Somewhere I want to hear and to say a good word for hard work, and self-sacrifice for goals that are noble - the cultivation of skill and excellence in the planting of a straight row of corn. Working hard is not workaholism. In fact, I commend to you the grace of hard work, the fulfillment of extending yourself, doing what you are called to do, completing tasks with a sense of work well done. I'm grateful for people completely dedicated to discovering a cure for Cancer. I thank God for hard working lawyers, bankers, school teachers, police and fire-fighters. The solution is not laziness. It is not even doing what you want to do when you want to do it. It's more complicated than that.

The solution begins, I think, with the personal responsibility to assign priorities to all the demands made of us... personal, relational, professional. They are not all equal. When we consistently deny personal or relational needs in favor of professional needs unhealthy things always happen.

Second, a further step toward resolution is to acknowledge the need for an inner life. We may be so absorbed in activity and work that that idea sounds frightening, but we each have a deep and authentic need for

time and space - simply to be: in Jesus' words - "a lonely place." We have no authenticity, no self, no being - without it. Now, not all of us can fly off to the mountains, or down to the sea shore. So it may be a morning walk, or a weekly meal alone, or daily devotions including disciplined meditation, and it may be public worship. A mother I know rather well used to tell me that the very best thing about worship - apart from my sermon of course - was that it was one glorious uninterrupted hour of relative quiet and aloneness.

"The world is too much with us;" Wordsworth wrote...
"Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, sordid boon!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
For this, for everything we are out of time:
It moves us not - Great God!"

It is no secret that whatever creativity God has given us is released in solitude. Rollo May, in The Courage to Create, tells about how frustrated he was, unable to resolve a problem and when he took a break to get away from it all, how the solution came to him, as if out of nowhere. Rollo May teaches that creativity requires intentional disciplined solitude. Artists know that intuitively. Albert Einstein got his best ideas, he said, not in the laboratory, but while shaving.

Contemporary American author Annie Dillard wrote a wonderful book, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, almost a spiritual journal - while living alone in the woods. She writes about the ancient Christian hermit monks called Anchorites. "I think of this house, clamped to the side of Tinker Creek as an anchor-hold. It holds me at anchor at rock bottom to the creek itself, and it keeps me steadied in the current, as a sea anchor does"... [p. 2]

It is a spiritual issue, finally: not just a matter of rearranging your time schedule or your priorities. It is a matter of your soul... of coming to terms with grace. That may necessitate something akin to a conversion for all of us. Our addiction to work is theological. In theological terms we are dependent on our work for some sense of salvation, or at least some sense of value and worth and significance and meaning.

I was both touched and helped by Professor Oates' recollection of his own conversion from a life-time of workaholism. Early on he became aware that he was missing a lot of important family events because of his addiction to his work. Later he developed back problems which worsened significantly when he over-worked. But the real spiritual crisis was precipitated when his eldest son was in Vietnam. Oates wrote: "He was a combat sailor, a machine-gunner on a small assault boat in the Mekong Delta. And for the first time in my life I was helpless. None of my actions or work could change a thing. I found myself falling back heavily on extra work to handle my anxiety. In the summer my major defense was gone... I realized that I could not face it alone, but that I needed God's help and the help of all the other people I could get."

And so this life long Christian - this saint of a man - had to change his way of life. He had to turn around and be converted; and the primary arena for spiritual conversion was his relationship to work. He began to come home at 6:00 without exception, became careful about over-committing himself. He began consciously to trust God to save him, and to relinquish his strong grip on working his own way to significance, success, meaning and salvation.

His testimony is that it worked. This is both the worst news for those of us who are workaholics and the best news for those of us who do enjoy and value work, and want to continue striving and working and giving, but also want desperately to be free of addiction to it. Oates' testimony is that when he was converted the amount and quality of his work did not suffer at all.

We need help with this. We need someone to stand with us, put a gracious hand on our arm and assure us that we will get it all done. We need someone to support us when we start to rearrange priorities and say "no," and take charge of our lives. We need people who will not judge us when we become intentional about obeying our Lord's command to "come away to a lonely place." We can do that for one another here.

Because we here - we who claim Jesus as Lord - know a secret. It is that in Jesus Christ God loves us. That love is sheer grace. It falls on us like the soft, life-giving rain. It requires no work, no merit, no deserving on our part - just our receptiveness. That love is sufficient. It can free us, whoever we are, corporate executive, high school student, broker, homemaker, attorney, secretary. God's love can free us from any scheme by which we are attempting to prove ourselves, assure our security, or forge our worth, or win our salvation.

We were not created to work until we drop in our tracks. We were created to do important work, to work hard even, but to depend on no one, no thing, but God for our salvation.

Sometimes you and I have to step back from it all, to see that. Sometimes we have to be quiet even to hear the gracious words of our Savior - "Come away by yourself to a lonely place and rest a while." Amen.